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The Buddha and Catch-22

It is now twenty-five years since the publication, in 1961, of Joseph Heller's astonishing novel, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon and Schuster; London: Jonathan Cape Ltd.); yet so far, it seems, there has been no public comment on certain striking parallels between the Buddha's Teaching and some of the content of that novel. Perhaps it would be as well to discuss those affinities now, before another quarter century elapses.

The most immediately obvious (though hardly the most profound) similarity between the Teaching and the novel is that both are deeply concerned with man's mortality. "Old age, sickness, and death" is a phrase that occurs repeatedly in the Buddha's Teaching, as recorded in the Pali Suttas (and, indeed, throughout the later Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan texts as well). A citation of even a small portion of such textual references [1] would be far beyond the scope of this brief discussion: the fact of man's mortality—a constant peril in an inconstant world—is a perception absolutely fundamental to the perspective of life presented by the Buddha's Teaching.

And in *Catch-22* the protagonist, Yossarian (a bombardier in World War II), is no less deeply concerned about old age, sickness, and death. The spectre of their imminence is his constant dread. As his friend Dunbar puts it,

“Do you know how long a year takes when it’s going away? This long.” He snapped his fingers. “A second ago you were stepping into college with your lungs full of fresh air. Today you’re an old man.”

“Old?” asked Clevinger with surprise. “What are you talking about?”

...“You’re inches away from death every time you go on a mission. How much older can you be at your age?” (pp. 38–9)

As for sickness, Yossarian had so many ailments to be afraid of that he was sometimes tempted to turn himself in to the hospital for good and spend the rest of his life stretched out there inside an oxygen tent with a battery of specialists and nurses seated at one side of his bed twenty-four hours a day waiting for something to go wrong.... Aneurisms, for instance; how else could they ever defend him in time against an aneurism of the aorta? ...He wondered often how he would ever recognise the first chill, flush, twinge, ache, belch, sneeze, stain, lethargy, vocal slip, lose of balance or lapse of memory that would signal the

inevitable beginning of the inevitable end. (pp. 171–2)

But even more than old age and sickness, it is the spectre of death itself that haunts both Yossarian and the novel: “At night when he was trying to sleep, Yossarian would call the roll of all the men, women and children he had ever known who were now dead. He tried to remember all the soldiers, and he resurrected images of all the elderly people he had known when a child...” (p. 339). Yossarian is enmeshed in a killing war which is (as the novel’s disclaimer makes clear) representative of a larger framework, [2] a war to which “there was no end in sight. The only end in sight was Yossarian’s own” (p. 16). Nevertheless, Yossarian “had decided to live forever or die in the attempt, and his only mission each time he went up was to come down alive” (p. 29). Yossarian feels death hovering about him—indeed, even living with him, in the form of a dead man named Mudd, who was not easy to live with.

However, old age, sickness, and death are not apprehended merely as things, as objects in a world of objects, in themselves neutral. The fact of death changes Yossarian’s world, as it does ours, radically, and Heller’s insistence upon this point is the beginning of the novel’s profundity.

In a world in which death is an unavoidable

presence, “it made sense to cry out in pain every night” (p. 54). Indeed, the disorder that the awareness of death introduces into a world which, throughout our lives, we are forever trying to order, leaves us with neither simple order nor simple disorder, but rather with “a world boiling in chaos in which everything was in proper orders” (p. 143). Death, the great modifier, alters everything, so that for Yossarian “nothing warped seemed any more in his strange, distorted surroundings” (p. 402).

It is this strange distortion that is the keystone of the novel’s humour—not merely that of its many throwaway jokes but also of the tragicomic perception which circles round and round the death of Snowden (“Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?” (p. 35): what a poignant joker), drawing ever closer, while at the same time mockingly inverting that trivial sensibility which ordinary men use to deny the disorder of death: “the Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable. In three days no one could stand him” (p. 9); “Nately had a bad start. He came from a good family” (p. 12); “Yossarian couldn’t be happy, even though the Texan didn’t want him to be” (p. 16); “strangers he didn’t know shot at him with cannons every time he flew up into the air to drop bombs on them, and it wasn’t funny at all. And if that wasn’t funny, there were lots of things that weren’t

even funnier” (p. 17). But it is not merely the one-liners that are inversions of everyday logic: that everyday sensibility is twisted into various shapes, so that each character is seen to exist in his own uniquely topsy-turvy world, a world whose shape hovers somewhere between a wry smile and a teardrop.

And of all the characters who live in their separate worlds of twisted logic (and the names, often as twisted as the logic, seem nearly endless: Hungry Joe, Chief White Half-oat, Doc Daneeka, Major de Coverly, Milo Minderbinder, Major Major Major Major...) perhaps the most logically insane character of all is the soldier in white, who “was encased from head to toe in plaster and gauze. He had two useless legs and two useless arms” (p. 9). Sewn into the bandages over the insides of both elbows were zippered lips through which he was fed clear fluid from a clear jar. A silent zinc pipe rose from the cement on his groin and was coupled to a slim rubber hose that carried waste from his kidneys and dripped it efficiently into a clear, stoppered jar on the floor. When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty and the two were simply switched quickly so that the stuff could drip back into him. (p. 10)

Changing the jars was no trouble to anyone but the men who watched them changed every hour or so and were baffled by the procedure. “Why can’t they hook

the two jars up to each other and eliminate the middleman?" (p. 168) The other patients in the ward... shrank from him with a tenderhearted aversion from the moment they set eyes on him.... They gathered in the farthest recess of the ward and gossiped about him in malicious, offended undertones, rebelling against his presence as a ghastly imposition and resenting him malevolently for the nauseating truth of which he was a bright reminder. (p. 166)

Although Yossarian too is mystified by the soldier in white, yet he "would recognise him anywhere. He wondered who he was" (p. 358). And if we need an image of *samsāra* we would have to look far to find a better one, or one more universal. The message of the soldier in white (who keeps turning up again) [3] is as universal as that of the letters in black (p. 8)—the letters which Yossarian, as bored censoring officer, blacks out completely or nearly so (and endorses them "Washington Irving" or, sometimes, "Irving Washington," thus unwittingly endangering the chaplain's life), "thereby leaving a message far more universal."

This tragicomic perception of man's condition (in which lots of things aren't even funnier) leads naturally to the question of the purpose of such a life, or of any life at all. (On the soldier in white: "It wasn't much of a life, but it was all the life he had....") Dr.

Stubbs, in conversation with Dunbar, raises this point but fails to answer it:

“I used to get a big kick out of saving people’s lives. Now I wonder what the hell’s the point, since they all have to die anyway.”

...“The point is to keep them from dying for as long as you can.”

“Yeah, but what’s the point, since they all have to die anyway?”

“The trick is not to think about that.”

“Never mind the trick. What the hell’s the point?”

Dunbar pondered in silence for a few moments. “Who the hell knows?” (p. 108)

But if the point of life is not known, and if life is nevertheless perceived as both tragic and comic, then from another perspective it could as well be seen as both sane and insane: and this leads naturally to the novel’s comic inversion of the notions of sanity and insanity, an inversion which is an underpinning of the book’s logic (or, as some would have it, illogic). Continuing their conversation, Dr. Stubbs and Dunbar discuss Yossarian and the dreaded approach of a particularly dangerous mission:

“That crazy bastard.”

“He’s not so crazy,” Dunbar said. “He swears he’s not going to fly to Bologna.”

“That’s just what I mean,” Dr. Stubbs answered. “That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left.” (p. 109)

Indeed, in a world in which “men went mad and were rewarded with medals” (p. 16), who is sane, save he who would escape from that world? This is Yossarian’s dilemma, the “vile, excruciating dilemma of duty and damnation” (p. 136): he doesn’t want to be in the war. He doesn’t want to die. “He thirsted for life” (p. 331). For Yossarian the enemy is not the Germans, or at least not only the Germans. “‘The enemy,’ retorted Yossarian with weighted precision, ‘is anybody who’s going to get you killed...’” And because of this “morbid aversion to dying” (p. 297), men shrink from him and regard him as crazy. Clevinger is such a one. “You’re crazy!” Clevinger shrieks at Yossarian on p. 16; but later (p. 75) we are told that the patriotic and idealistic Clevinger was a dope “who would rather be a corpse than bury one”; and finally (p. 103): “Clevinger was dead. That was the basic flaw in his philosophy.” And yet, by the very fact of being part of such a world one cannot be completely sane; and to be not completely sane is to be not sane at all. But if one tries to escape, is that not then evidence of a spark of sanity? Perhaps so; but the

problem is that when we try to escape we discover that we can't: every effort to free oneself from (in Buddhist terms) involvement with craving, aversion, and delusion—or in the novel's terms, the war—every effort apparently brings one back to the same dilemma, and results only in making the problem more urgent (and perhaps also more evident), as will be recognised by anyone who has ever tried to extirpate the root of craving, and failed. Is it not madness, then, to try to escape?

And yet, if to do nothing is regarded as less insane, still that too does not lead to disengagement from a mad world. This is the very crux of Yossarian's dilemma, and ours as well: a dilemma illuminated in experience by the effort to practise the Buddha's Teaching and in fiction by Yossarian's effort to escape from the war. Heller puts it this way:

"Can't you ground someone who's crazy?"
[Yossarian asks the flight surgeon, Doc Daneeka.]

"Oh, sure. I have to. There's a rule saying I have to ground anyone who's crazy. "

"Then why don't you ground me? I'm crazy.... Ask any of the others. They'll tell you how crazy I am."

"They're crazy."

"Then why don't you ground them?"

“Why don’t they ask me to ground them?”

“Because they’re crazy, that’s why.”

“Of course they’re crazy,” Doc Daneeka replied. “I just told you they’re crazy, didn’t I? And you can’t let crazy people decide whether you’re crazy or not, can you?”

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. “Is Orr crazy?”

“He sure is,” Doc Daneeka said.... “I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to.”

“That’s all he has to do to be grounded?”

“That’s all. Let him ask me.”

“And then you can ground him?” Yossarian asked.

“No. Then I can’t ground him.”

“You mean there’s a catch?”

“Sure there’s a catch,” Doc Daneeka replied. “Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn’t really crazy.” (p. 45)

Thus Yossarian’s efforts to establish a rational basis for being grounded must fail. Logic is an inadequate tool to deal with the human situation, for whenever we apply logic there is always a catch. This is not to suggest that logic is not necessary, but rather that it is

not adequate. In this computer age we could hardly manage without logic, let alone computers. Without logic we could make neither mathematics nor music nor marmalade. But whenever we try to deal with the fundamentals of existence, with the forever unanswerable question, “Who am I?” (or any other question concerned with “me”), we find that logic neither answers that question nor shows us the way to stop asking it. [4] (““Why me?” was his constant lament, and the question was a good one” (p. 34).)

And the reason for this, the Buddha informs us, is because of *avijjā*, or ignorance. But *avijjā* is not a mere absence of information; it is a refusal to see what is at all times there to be seen. It is not failure to see one particular thing among other particular things, but a radical refusal to see the way all particular things are, and in this respect it is as great a modifier as death—indeed, the two are (so the Buddha tells us) inseparable. The dependent arising formulation says, in summary, “With ignorance as condition, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come into being.”

The deluded person, in refusing to see the nature of all things, refuses also to see the nature of his refusal to see (which is also a thing). That is, he refuses to see delusion. Thus, by denying itself delusion sustains itself. This is stated in the suttas (e.g. *Sammādiṭṭhi*

Sutta, MN 9) as follows:

“Friends, that which is non-knowledge of suffering, non-knowledge of the arising of suffering, non-knowledge of the ceasing of suffering, non-knowledge of the way leading to the ceasing of suffering, this, friends, is called ignorance.”

For after all, what is “the way leading to the ceasing of suffering”? It is (the suttas tell us) the Noble Eightfold Path. And what is the first factor of this path? Right View. Ignorance, then, involves non-knowledge of Right View. And Right View is knowledge of the arising of suffering; that is to say, knowledge of ignorance. Right View is knowledge of Right View, and also knowledge of wrong view, whereas wrong view is non-knowledge of wrong view, and also non-knowledge of Right View. And this structure of ignorance is, in fact, *Catch-22* at its most fundamental level. As Heller describes it (p. 46):

There was only one catch and that was *Catch-22*, which specified that a concern for one’s own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he

was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

"That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.

"It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.

Thus, with absolute simplicity, we are condemned to madness. And if this is not convincing, Heller presses his point home by telling us (on the same page) that Catch-22 is like the flies that Orr sees in Appleby's eyes.

"Oh, they're there, all right," Orr had assured [Yossarian]... "although he probably doesn't even know it. That's why he can't see things as they really are."

"How come he doesn't know it?" inquired Yossarian.

"Because he's got flies in his eyes," Orr with exaggerated patience. "How can he see he's got flies in his eyes if he's got flies in his eyes?"

It made as much sense as anything else....

Yathābhūtam na pajānāti: he does not see things as they really are: the phrase—so typical a sutta

description of the *puthujjana*, the unenlightened commoner—is used here by Heller to illuminate precisely the characteristic of being entrapped in a situation. Not only does the *puthujjana* have flies in his eyes, he does not see that he has them, and he does not see this because he has them. His dilemma is that though he must find a way to see, yet he cannot find that way precisely because he cannot see. Indeed, he cannot even see for himself that this is his problem. And this is the dilemma which, at its most fundamental level, is the specific concern of the Buddha’s Teaching. The structure of *avijjā*, the structure of *Catch-22*, the structure of “having flies in one’s eyes”: they are one and the same. *Catch-22* is *avijjā*. The title character in both the novel and in our lives never appears and yet is omnipresent.

All of this does not oblige us to conclude that Heller is enlightened, or that he is even a Buddhist. Describing something and seeing it directly are two different things; and even in direct perception there are different levels of profundity. “At the field a heavy silence prevailed, overpowering motion like a ruthless, insensate spell holding in thrall the only beings who might break it. The chaplain was in awe” (p. 371). This, it is clear enough, is of the same nature as having flies in one’s eyes; and yet it is also clear enough that this sort of spell is of a much less

fundamental grade. Not only can we on the outside see it, it is conceivable that the men at the field could be aware of the spell at the same time they were (for the time being) powerless to break it. Appleby, on the other hand, must be entirely unaware of the flies in his eyes.

On an even less fundamental level is the situation of the men while they await the dreaded mission to Bologna. The mission cannot be flown until the rain stops and the landing strips dry out. But the rain-forced delay in the mission only gives the men more time to be more terrified. "Their only hope was that it would never stop raining, and they had no hope because they all knew it would.... The more it rained, the worse they suffered. The worse they suffered, the more they prayed that it would continue raining" (p. 117). Again we have a situation of entrapment, but on a crude and manifest level of experience.

But though we would describe these various levels of *Catch-22* as being only rough approximations to the subtle and pervasive deception of *avijjā*, as expounded by the Buddha, we must also recognise Heller's achievement in seeing the central significance of this self-replicative structure in human existence and (though he doesn't know what to do about it) in describing it in a form which has struck a deeply responsive chord in so many. Although he may lack

the wisdom to resolve the dilemma he describes, yet he has sufficient wisdom to not let go of that perception; nor should we, for by being manifest, such occurrences can serve both to remind us of the subtle central dilemma which is the template upon which those coarser experiences depend and also to provide us with a model which, applied with proper attention, can indicate what action, or what sort of action, can bring that central dilemma to an end.

In the end, perhaps due to the exigencies of the novel's form, Heller does suggest a solution to Yossarian's dilemma. Whether this solution works artistically is not of concern to us here. Rather, we need to understand why this suggestion of a solution is incompatible with the Buddha's Teaching.

The Buddha's Teaching is concerned with letting go of what can be surrendered within the sphere of the unenlightened (namely, sensuality, hatred, lethargy, agitation, and doubt—the five hindrances) in order to allow for the possibility of seeing what might be let go of beyond that sphere. This further perception can be indicated by one who has already seen for himself, and must be initially accepted by the practitioner as an act of faith, until he too comes to see it. At that point it is possible for there to be a further letting go, a giving up of what can be surrendered only outside the sphere of the unenlightened, namely, all beliefs concerned

with selfhood (*sakkāyadiṭṭhī attavāda*) and, eventually, the conceit “I am” (*asmimāna*). Thus the Buddha’s Teaching is a course of practice concerned fundamentally with renunciation. Without giving up the world to the limits of one’s ability to do so one will never be able to extend those limits: one will instead remain entrapped within the world.

Heller considers this approach, but rejects it. Yossarian certainly sees the problem: he is “unable to adjust to the idea of war” (p. 297) and repeatedly flees the oppressiveness of the world by running to “the cloistered shelter of a hospital” (p. 177) with a supposititious liver ailment. That this flight is meant to be seen as (at least in a sense) religious is borne out by a doctor who tells Yossarian that the family of a just-deceased soldier have “travelled all the way from New York to see a dying soldier, and you’re the handiest one we’ve got.”

“What are you talking about?” Yossarian asked suspiciously. “I’m not dying.”

“Of course you’re dying. We’re all dying. Where the devil else do you think you’re heading?”

“They didn’t come to see me,” Yossarian objected. “They came to see their son.”

“They’ll have to take what they can get. As far as we’re concerned, one dying boy is just as good as any

other, or just as bad. To a scientist, all dying boys are equal...." (p. 181)

Thus the doctors, the staff of that cloistered shelter, perform the essentially religious function of reminding Yossarian ("how could he have forgotten") of his mortality; and they also insist that he observe the celibacy normally associated with monastic institutions: "How do you expect anyone to believe you have a liver condition if you keep squeezing the nurses' tits every time you get a chance? You're going to have to give up sex if you want to convince people you've got an ailing liver."

"That's a hell of a price to pay just to keep alive...." (p. 181)

Precisely: giving up sensuality (to say nothing of hatred, lethargy, agitation, and doubt) is a price Yossarian is not prepared to pay. He wants the sybaritic salvation sought also by Hungry Joe, to whom women were "lovely, satisfying, maddening manifestations of the miraculous, instruments of pleasure" (p. 52), and he dreams of being interred for the duration of the war (i.e., for all eternity) in Sweden, an earthly (and earthy) paradise where he could keep himself busy siring dozens of illegitimate little Yossarians. Yossarian wants the world's pleasures without having to endure the world's

drawbacks, and he fails to see the essence of the world's dangers. (Hungry Joe is more consistent than Yossarian on this point, for he goes to pieces each time he finishes flying the number of missions Headquarters requires, and recovers only when Headquarters raises the number of missions required, as it inevitably does, throwing him back on combat status.)

If any character in *Catch-22* comes close to accepting the Buddha's advice it would be Dunbar, who tries to increase his lifespan by cultivating boredom, on the grounds that when you're bored time passes slower. His idea seems to be that if only he could achieve a state of total and absolute boredom he would be, for all intents, eternal. This sounds like a rough literary approximation to meditation (although we must remember that the Buddha, unlike many Eastern teachers, quite explicitly stated that meditation by itself is an insufficient condition for enlightenment).

Dunbar, given to cultivating boredom, to seeking eternity, lies motionless in bed: he goes so far in his efforts that at one point Yossarian, looking at him, wonders whether he is still alive. This will remind us of the story of the Venerable Sañjiva who, we are told (MN 50/M I 333), was seated immersed in the highest meditative attainment when some cowherds, shepherds, and ploughmen, passing by, saw him and

thought, as did Yossarian of Dunbar, that he was dead. They collected grass, wood, and cow dung, heaped it up about the Ven. Sañjiva, set his pyre alight, and went on their way. The next morning Ven. Sañjiva emerged from his meditative attainment and went wandering for alms-food. His would-be cremators were astonished at seeing him alive and gave him the name by which he became known, Sañjiva, which means “with life.” Dunbar seems to have lacked the Ven. Sañjiva’s meditative abilities, but each sought to escape death (Ven. Sañjiva, the Sutta tells us, successfully), and each came thereby to be taken as dead.

It is common, of course, for beginning meditators to be assailed by boredom (as well as the other four hindrances); however, this does not justify equating boredom and meditation: on the contrary, boredom is an enemy of meditation. Despite the story of Ven. Sañjiva, then, we must regard any effort to equate meditation with the cultivation of boredom as tenuous, and as being further weakened by the episode in which Dunbar becomes a *fortiori*. However, we must also note that it is immediately after Dunbar becomes convinced, upon re-encountering the soldier in white, that (p. 358) “There’s no one inside! ...He’s hollow inside, like a chocolate soldier”—thereby perhaps suggesting something of the Buddha’s

teaching of *anattā*, of not-self—that Dunbar ‘is disappeared’. We never learn the meaning of this cryptic event (“It doesn’t make sense. It isn’t even good grammar” (p. 359), but if the parallel with meditation is accepted then the further parallel that would be suggested here is with Nibbāna, extinction. After being disappeared, Dunbar is described (p. 360) as being “nowhere to be found”, which is exactly how the suttas describe beings who have attained full enlightenment (arahants). [5]

Perhaps a literary parallel of an achievement that transcends literature (let alone literature, Nibbāna transcends *bhava*, being) could not be more closely described; but in any case we cannot allow that the parallel is more than a suggestion, and (no doubt inevitably) an inaccurate one at that. And in any case ‘to be disappeared’ sounds, from Heller’s description of it, far less desirable than extinction, from the Buddha’s description of that. (Still, it would be interesting to know how much acquaintance Heller actually had, if any, with any school of Buddhism during the seven years in which he was writing Catch-22. [6])

And if any character tries, however ineffectually, to understand the real nature of his situation, it is not Yossarian but the chaplain. The chaplain (he was named Shipman in the hard-cover edition, but for

some reason the name was changed in the paperback edition to Tappman—not his only identity crisis), who has an open mind, is continually wondering what everything was all about. ...There was no way of really knowing anything, he knew, not even that there was no way of really knowing anything. Was there a single true faith, or a life after death? ...These were the great, complex questions of ontology that tormented him. Yet they never seemed nearly as crucial to him as the question of kindness and good manners. He was pinched perspiringly in the epistemological dilemma of the sceptic, unable to accept solutions to problems he was unwilling to dismiss as unsolvable. He was never without misery and never without hope. (pp. 262–3)

In the chaplain's tale, the human dilemma is presented from a different point of view: it is not a question of sanity or insanity but, in Kafkaesque terms, one of guilt or innocence. Because it is the nature of beings that they are continually trying to establish an existence that continually eludes them, [7] their existence is perpetually in doubt, and they exist, if at all, in a state of guilt. This, it would seem, is the basic perception of Kafka's Trial: Joseph K. arrests himself by recognising that his existence, being unjustifiable, is essentially guilty. And the chaplain (for whom the question "Who am I?" becomes acute

when he is formally charged with “being Washington Irving” (p. 378)) is also in this situation:

“You’ve got nothing to be afraid of if you’re not guilty. What are you so afraid of? You’re not guilty, are you?”

“Sure he’s guilty,” said the colonel. “Guilty as hell.”

“Guilty of what?” implored the chaplain, feeling more and more bewildered. ...“What did I do?” (p. 373)

And later the chaplain’s identity crisis and dilemma of existential guilt is expressed in the same terms that were used earlier to describe Catch-22:

“I offered it to Sergeant Whitcomb because I didn’t want it.”

“Why’d you steal it from Colonel Cathcart if you didn’t want it?”

“I didn’t steal it from Colonel Cathcart!”

“Then why are you so guilty, if you didn’t steal it?”

“I’m not guilty!”

“Then why would we be questioning you if you weren’t guilty?” (p. 377)

Thus each of us faces the question of our basic unjustifiability in a purposeless world. Some, of

course, flee from these questions and deny them (by indulging in sensuality, hatred, lethargy, agitation, and doubt); but the questions return for so long as their root, the conceit "I am", exists, and the verdict is inevitable: "Guilty."

"Chaplain," he continued, looking up, "we accuse you also of the commission of crimes and infractions we don't even know about yet. Guilty or innocent?"

"I don't know, sir. How can I say if you don't tell me what they are?"

"How can we tell you if we don't know?"

"Guilty," decided the colonel.

"Sure he's guilty," agreed the major. "If they're his crimes and infractions, he must have committed them."

"Guilty it is, then," chanted the officer without insignia.... (p. 379)

And "guilty" it is for all of us, if the charge is the fundamental one of being possessors, or even of simply "being": being what?

And thus Heller repeatedly and ingeniously offers us brilliant literary expressions of the dilemma of existence. The formulations are lucid and compelling, and they fully take account of the circular and self-

sustaining nature of the dilemma. For this we can praise *Catch-22*, and perhaps find it of use as a tool in keeping to the forefront of our awareness the nature of our problem. But it would be asking too much to expect the novel to offer the means of resolving that dilemma. For that we must turn to the Buddha's Teaching.

Notes

1. For example: As the herdsman drives his kine with a stick to pasture-land, thus decay and health's decline drive out the life of man.—Dhp v 135. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Perhaps it would be going too far to discover in this larger framework a reference to the Buddha's recognition of *samsāra*, the round of deaths and rebirths; but it cannot be excessive to relate the facts of birth and death to the minute and Learical apocalypse achieved in the vision of Snowden's death: "Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. ... Ripeness was all." (pp. 429–30) [\[Back\]](#)
3. The circular nature of *samsāra* finds its parallel in Catch-22 (if circles can have parallels), not only in the re-appearance of the soldier in white, but also in the circling round the death of Snowden, going around twice over Ferrara, the soldier who saw everything twice, and many other recurrent events and phrases. Each time Yossarian gets close to having completed his missions Headquarters raises the number required: there is always another tour of duty. Like Rohitassa (see S II 26 = A IV 45), and like us, Yossarian cannot

reach an end by going. [\[Back\]](#)

4. It is for this reason that the Buddha's Teaching is said to be *atakkāvacara*, not in the sphere of reason or logic. (Catch-22 is not the only well-known book which asserts the insanity implicit in being in a situation. In *Alice in Wonderland* the Cheshire Cat tells Alice, "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad. You must be or you wouldn't have come." Indeed, Catch-22 contains a number of very specific allusions to the Alice books.) [\[Back\]](#)
5. The phrase occurs frequently in the suttas. See for example the concluding lines of Vakkali Sutta (SN 22:87). Also at Dhp v 180 we find:

That tangle of snares by which he'd be
penned isn't found anywhere.

His range has no end, that Buddha awake.

What track can there be to trace one who's
trackless, craving-free? [\[Back\]](#)
6. This question was put to Mr Heller. The reply was that he knew "not an inkling." The range of the *puthujjana*, it seems, is more extensive than commonly supposed. [\[Back\]](#)
7. Thus the question "Who am I?", whether or not it is answerable, is recognised at once to be vital and fundamental to the epistemological dilemma we

each face; indeed, it is thus that there is the concept of such a dilemma at all. [\[Back\]](#)

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